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THE ARTS

By Ruth Dean

A Ray of Hope for Museums Agency

Until last week, when a House subcommittee cast a sympathetic vote its way, the future seemed doomed for the Institute of Museum Services, which has done a creditable job in its fledgling role of helping maintain the nation's 5,500 museums.

With the incoming Reagan administration in January came a "termination" notice for the 4-year-old IMS. Not long after, during the days of Plum Book pruning of Carter appointees, the IMS' first and only director, Lee Kimche, got her own "termination" notice.

In the Carter administration, the agency had seemed to lead a charmed life. That was principally because Kimche knew her way in and out of the corridors of Democratic power that created the agency under the aegis of Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., former Rep. John Brademas, D-Ind., and former Federal Council on the Arts honorary chairperson Joan Mondale, who served on the IMS' first board.

But even before the change of political fortunes that slated IMS for extinction under the Republicans, the agency was heading into troubled waters.

The last year of the Carter administration was marked by budgetary cuts for all the arts agencies, and the splitting of the old Department of Health, Education and Welfare to make room for the new Department of Education. The museums agency — often called "the third arts agency" — went under Education, but it took a few bureaucratic wrangles for it to establish its autonomy there.

Even before that, in 1978, during hearings before Sen. Pell's Education and Labor subcommittee on the arts and humanities to re-authorize IMS for another five years, Pell trotted out his favorite hobby horse — that IMS belonged with the Smithsonian because it was "the museum of museums — truly the national museum." His theory hasn't found many subscribers, least of all the Smithsonian.

Though the IMS had lost many friends in Congress with the Republican landslide, the charmed life IMS seemed to have led, even in the midst of Democratic vicissitudes, was still holding at its board meeting here last December.

It was an up time. Congress had passed legislation extending the life of the agency for another five years, and \$12.9 million in funding for 1981. And, at a time when everyone in government was quaking at what was to come, Assistant Secretary of Education James Rutherford told the IMS

board that in his talks with the Reagan education transition team, he'd received no questions about IMS, in contrast to the "sharp questioning" about other programs. So he assumed no news was good news.

Right? Wrong. The truth came with a sudden shock, when the now-famous "black book" of Reagan budget-cut proposals was circulated around Capitol Hill prior to their announcement by the President's Office of Management and Budget.

That's when the Arts and Humanities endowments learned about their 50 percent cuts, and IMS learned it wasn't long for this world. In the terse language of Reaganomics, its officials read: "The administration proposes to terminate the Institute of Museum Services," as "part of an overall administration effort to rethink federal support of cultural activities."

"While museums and other repositories of cultural artifacts are important in our society, they have traditionally been the beneficiaries of private philanthropy, for both construction and operating funds."

When national museum officials appeared at a recent Senate hearing for testimony from outside witnesses regarding the planned cuts for IMS, there were no senators present; indeed none in behalf of the Humanities either — not even for esteemed scholar Buckminster Fuller.

There was only the committee staff to hear Alan Shestack, director of the Yale University Art Gallery, describe how IMS funds literally helped the museum bail itself out of a sudden flood caused by a street main break. "We have George Washington's furniture," he explained. "We had to move fast to build supports to get it out of the water; IMS money did that."

Earlier on, Sen. James McClure, R-Idaho, chairman of the Senate appropriations subcommittee on the Interior, which considers funding for the arts and museums, was the lone member of his committee present when acting IMS officials testified in behalf of their rescinded budget.

The hearing was very low-key. The handwriting was on the wall. Gently, McClure reminded the small group of witnesses about the administration's requested cutbacks. It spelled only one thing — the end of the road for IMS.

Enters on the scene the House appropriations subcommittee on the Interior, the committee headed by

the influential and longtime arts advocate Rep. Sidney Yates, D-Ill. In a little-publicized markup session last week, the committee, in an unrecorded voice vote, overturned the Republicans' carefully stacked cart of budget cuts. When the OMB recommendation to rescind the IMS' 1981 funds to leave only \$500,000 for phase-out operations came up, the committee rejected it.

In effect, the House action restored — at the subcommittee level, at least — the \$12.4-million rescission demanded by the Reagan administration. Of course, it still must weather the storm through full committee, then floor vote, and the whole process all over again in the Senate before its final fate is learned.

Though she has no official connection with IMS now, Kimche, when reached for comment by phone, said she was gladdened by the House action, and hoped it would hold. She thought the administration decision to rescind 1981 funds "unfair — because museums have to work a year ahead. It would have been much better to begin their reductions in 1982."

That last week's House move was spearheaded by Yates was not surprising, in light of the dramatic hearing he chaired just two weeks ago to showcase his concern and that of his colleagues sympathetic to stopping the proposed cutbacks in cultural funding.

"He's not going to hold still for elimination of IMS," said an aide. The move was viewed by some as the opening salvo in a spirited effort to save arts funding from the budget ax — a view, incidentally, that knows no party lines in either house.

Yates pulled out all the stops two weeks ago with a day-long hearing for outside witnesses to place testimony into the record opposing the proposed arts cuts.

Orchestrated by the American Arts Alliance, the hearing drew everybody who was anybody in the arts world for the last 20 years. You name them: Jean Stapleton, Eliot Feld, Robert Rauschenberg, Edward Albee, Billy Taylor, E.L. Doctorow, Alan Lomax, James Earl Jones, Ming Cho Lee, Benita Valente, and pollster Lou Harris, among the 50-plus witnesses.

Yates wasted no time in getting to the point. The call for a 50 percent cut, he suspected was "the first step toward eliminating government support of the arts." The Reagan administration, he charged, "is bent on destruction of the endowments."